

Representation of Women in the Novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*: A Feminist Literary Criticism Study

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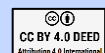
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women in the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy, one of the most influential works in Indonesia's popular Islamic literary tradition. While prior studies have largely focused on its film adaptation through critical discourse analysis, the original novel text remains underexplored from the standpoint of feminist literary criticism, despite the persistent tension between idealized images of Muslim women in popular fiction and the social realities of gender inequality such narratives may reinforce. This study aims to describe the pattern of idealized women's representation constructed through the characters Aisha, Maria, and Nurul, and to reveal the gap between that idealized image and the social reality of gender they experience. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, using textual analysis grounded in feminist literary criticism, with the novel as the primary data source. Data were collected through close reading, categorized by theme, and analyzed using reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with validity established through triangulation. Findings show idealized representation is constructed through three dimensions, personal piety, domestic role, and self-sacrifice, echoing archetypal figures from early Islamic history, yet reveals a clear gap with social reality, particularly regarding polygamy and household power relations dominated by the male protagonist. Even as female characters exhibit limited agency.

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1. Introduction

Popular literary works play an important role in shaping public perceptions of gender relations, including within the genre of popular Islamic literature that has developed rapidly in Indonesia since the early twenty-first century. The novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy stands as one of the most influential works within Indonesia's popular Islamic literary tradition (Azhari et al., 2022).

Its widespread popularity has made the novel an effective vehicle for instilling moral values concerning love between humans and God as well as among human beings

themselves, conveyed through characters who model sincere love, loyalty, patience, responsibility, sacrifice, and strong faith while drawing explicitly on Qur'anic verses and hadith (Ghaisani et al., 2024). The novel's popularity largely stems from its moral message about divine and interpersonal love, notwithstanding certain shortcomings in how religious evidence is employed within the text (Karkono, 2009). Set in Cairo, the story follows Fahri, an Indonesian doctoral student at Al-Azhar University, whose life becomes entangled with three women: Aisha, the pious wife he eventually marries; Maria, his Coptic Christian neighbor who falls in love with him and later becomes his second wife after converting to Islam; and Nurul, a fellow Indonesian student who harbors unspoken feelings for him throughout much of the narrative. This constellation of relationships, culminating in Fahri's polygamous marriage to Aisha and Maria, opens rich analytical space for examining how women are portrayed within an Islamic value framework (Hartati & Wulan, 2016).

Reading these relationships requires a framework capable of identifying not only how female characters are described, but how those descriptions position them relative to male authority within the text. Sugihastuti and Suharto (2002) define feminist literary criticism as an approach concerned with uncovering how literary texts construct, naturalize, or resist patriarchal ideology, paying particular attention to whether female characters are granted subjectivity and voice or are reduced to objects defined through their relation to male characters.

Building on this, Djajanegara (2003) identifies several recurring forms through which patriarchal subordination manifests in literary texts, including the marginalization of women from decision-making processes, the stereotyping of female virtue as passive obedience, the subordination of women's interests to male authority within domestic and marital structures, and the imposition of a double standard in which male desire is narratively normalized while female desire is either suppressed or morally scrutinized. These categories provide the specific analytical lens applied in this study: the analysis that follows examines whether Aisha, Maria, and Nurul are afforded narrative agency and voice, or whether their characterization instead naturalizes their subordination to Fahri's authority, particularly in relation to the novel's central polygamous marriage and the domestic decision-making it entails.

Research on the representation of women in Islamic value-based literary works has been widely conducted by Indonesian literary scholars (Sugihastuti & Suharto, 2002; Wiyatmi, 2012). Feminist literary criticism has emerged as one of the most frequently applied analytical frameworks for examining how female characters are constructed within literary texts, particularly in uncovering the tension between patriarchal values and efforts to deconstruct the gender injustice experienced by women (Djajanegara, 2003).

Feminist literature can be understood as an attempt to deconstruct the social conditions experienced by women, who have historically been subordinated within social systems (Wiyatmi, 2012). The theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism in Indonesia draws heavily on the work of Sugihastuti and Suharto, who comprehensively outline the theory and application of this approach within Indonesian literature, as well as on Djajanegara's work, which remains a classic reference in national feminist literary criticism studies.

Studies on both the novel and film adaptation of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* from the perspective of women's representation have previously been undertaken by several researchers (Kodriyaningrum, 2020). Apriani (2012), in her master's thesis at Universitas

Padjadjaran, analyzed the representation of women living under polygamous marriage in the films *Berbagi Suami* and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis model. That study sought to reveal how the subject and object positions of women were constructed in both films, particularly in relation to the experience of polygamous relationships within Indonesia's cultural and religious context (Wardani, V., & Jamaluddin, 2019).

Another study examined forms of Islamic masculinity within the novel and their tension with feminist thought, finding that the depiction of masculinity in the novel encompassed the practice of polygamy, piety, respect toward women, humor and romanticism, an independent work ethic, and firmness of principle. Similar research on other popular Islamic literary works, such as the novels of Asma Nadia, has likewise shown patterns of Muslim women's representation that integrate spiritual awareness with critical gender consciousness (Diana et al., 2026).

Although research on women's representation in popular Islamic literature has been fairly extensive, most prior studies on *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* have focused primarily on its film adaptation using critical discourse analysis, while in-depth examination of the original novel text through a purely feminist literary criticism approach remains limited. The tension between the idealized image of women constructed through Islamic values and the social reality of women experiencing subordination, polygamy, and restricted personal agency has also not been extensively explored specifically within this novel's text. This gap deserves attention, given that *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* continues to serve as a popular reference for the public in understanding the ideal relationship between men and women within an Islamic framework, making a critical understanding of this construction both academically and socially relevant.

Based on the discussion above, this study is formulated to address two primary research questions. The first concerns how the idealized representation of women is portrayed in the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. The second concerns how the gap between this idealized representation and the social reality of gender is depicted in the novel, examined through a feminist literary criticism approach. This study aims to describe the pattern of idealized women's representation in the novel while also revealing the gap between that idealized image and the social reality experienced by its female characters.

This article is organized into five sections. The first section outlines the background, research problem, and objectives of the study. The second section presents the theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism used as the analytical lens. The third section explains the research method applied. The fourth section presents the findings and discussion regarding the idealized representation of women and gender reality in the novel. The fifth section concludes the article with a summary and suggestions for future research.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a literary text analysis method grounded in feminist literary criticism (Astuti et al., 2018; Gapur et al., 2024; Gapur & Taulia, 2023). This approach was selected because it aligns with the research objectives, namely to describe the pattern of idealized women's representation in the novel and to reveal the gap between that idealized image and the social reality of gender experienced by the female characters. Feminist literary criticism is considered appropriate for this study because the approach is specifically designed to examine the

construction of female characters in literary works, while also uncovering the tension between patriarchal values and efforts to deconstruct the gender injustice embedded within them (Astuti et al., 2018; Larasati et al., 2025).

The primary data source for this study is the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. The data analyzed consist of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narratives depicting the characters, attitudes, and social relations of the female characters in the novel, particularly Aisha, Maria, and Nurul. Secondary data sources include books, journal articles, and prior research relevant to feminist literary criticism and the representation of women in popular Islamic literature.

Data collection was conducted through library research following these steps. The novel was read repeatedly and carefully to gain a thorough understanding of the storyline and the characterization of the female figures (Astuti et al., 2018). Textual passages containing elements of women's representation were then marked and coded according to the four categories of patriarchal subordination identified by Djajanegara (2003): marginalization, stereotyped obedience, subordination to male authority, and double standards of desire.

Coding followed specific textual indicators for each category. Passages were coded as marginalization when female characters were narrated only through male-focalized point of view, or when their decisions were reported secondhand rather than rendered as direct speech. Passages were coded as stereotyped obedience when a female character's dialogue contained compliance markers, such as expressions of acquiescence, religiously framed consent, or the absence of any sustained rebuttal following an initial objection, particularly where such objections were resolved within the same scene rather than developed across subsequent passages.

Passages were coded as subordination to male authority when major household decisions, such as marriage, remarriage, or conflict resolution between wives, were narrated as originating from or being finalized by the male protagonist, with the female character's dialogue limited to brief reactive lines rather than sustained deliberation. Passages were coded as double standards of desire when the narrative normalized the male protagonist's romantic or marital initiative while framing equivalent female desire, such as Nurul's unspoken feelings, as something to be suppressed, concealed, or morally monitored.

Descriptive passages were separately coded for piety markers, distinguishing externalized indicators (references to dress, gaze, and ritual conduct) from internalized indicators (extended interior monologue or theological reasoning), in order to compare the narrative space allotted to female versus male spiritual reflection. The coded data were subsequently grouped according to representational themes, including domestic roles, polygamous relationships, subordination, and forms of agency or resistance exhibited by the female characters against the norms that constrain them.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing on textual excerpts relevant to women's representation (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). Data display was presented in the form of narrative description supported by illustrative excerpts from the novel. Conclusions were drawn by connecting the identified patterns of representation to the theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism, particularly drawing on the theories developed by Sugihastuti and Suharto as well as Djajanegara, in order to uncover the underlying meaning behind the construction of idealized women and its gap with the social reality of gender.

The validity of the data in this study was established through theoretical triangulation, comparing the analytical results with multiple relevant feminist theoretical perspectives, as well as source triangulation, comparing the findings with prior research on the representation of women in the works of Habiburrahman El Shirazy and similar popular Islamic literature (Astuti et al., 2018). These steps were taken to ensure that the analytical results could be academically accounted for and were not merely subjective.

3. Result and discussion

3.1 Ideal Representation of Women in the Novel Ayat-Ayat Cinta

Analysis of the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* reveals a pattern of idealized women's representation constructed through the characterization of Aisha, Maria, and Nurul, whose portrayals draw considerable inspiration from archetypal women in Islamic history during the time of the Prophet, such as Khadijah bint Khuwailid, Aisha bint Abu Bakr, and Fatimah az-Zahra bint Muhammad SAW (Iqbal, 2017; Munawir & Ulya, 2024). This inspiration is traceable not merely at the level of plot but at the level of diction: the narrator repeatedly frames Aisha through vocabulary associated with scholarly and spiritual authority, such as descriptions of her calm recitation of the Qur'an late at night and her measured, deliberate speech when addressing Fahri, a narrative choice that textually echoes the reverence historically accorded to Aisha bint Abu Bakr as a source of religious knowledge.

The three female characters in the novel are portrayed as possessing strong spiritual piety, intellectual capacity, and adherence to religious norms, symbolically reflecting a combination of qualities from these three inspirational figures as a form of moral perfection for a Muslim woman (Diana et al., 2026). This construction aligns with the category of idealized women's representation within the framework developed by Sugihastuti and Suharto, who emphasize that the idealized image of women in literature is often built through a combination of social compliance and spiritual virtue (Astuti et al., 2018).

3.2 Personal Piety

The first dimension is personal piety, demonstrated at the textual level through recurring narrative markers of religious diligence and self-guarded conduct (Masnila & Sassi, 2025). Aisha's dialogue is consistently framed in a register of restraint; when addressing Fahri directly, her lines are rendered short, formal, and devoid of casual intimacy, a stylistic choice that textually enacts the boundary-keeping the narrative attributes to her. Descriptive passages surrounding her similarly emphasize visual markers of modesty rather than interior monologue, with the narration lingering on her dress and downcast gaze more often than on her private thoughts, whereas passages devoted to Fahri's inner reflection are considerably longer and more introspective. This asymmetry in narrative attention itself constitutes evidence that piety, as textually constructed, is externalized onto Aisha's body and comportment rather than developed as reflective interiority (Wahyuni & Harahap, 2021). Such a construction can be traced to normative interpretations of the injunction to preserve modesty found in Surah An-Nur, verse 31, which instructs Muslim women to guard their gaze and cover themselves as part of Islamic social ethics.

The Indonesian Muslim scholar Nasaruddin Umar, in his work *Argumen Kesetaraan Gender Perspektif Al-Qur'an*, offers an important observation that verses of

this kind are frequently interpreted normatively without regard for their socio-historical context, causing women's piety within popular religious discourse to be reduced largely to matters of physical appearance and symbolic compliance (Haikal & Kholid, 2024). This observation maps directly onto the textual pattern identified above: the narrative repeatedly signals Aisha's piety through what she wears and how she averts her gaze, rather than through extended passages of theological reasoning or spiritual doubt of the kind afforded to Fahri.

3.3 Domestic Role

The second dimension is domestic role, textually constructed through a consistent pattern in which the female characters' dialogue functions to affirm rather than to challenge Fahri's decisions. When Fahri informs Aisha of his intention to marry Maria, the narrative renders her response not as deliberation but as near-immediate acquiescence phrased in terms of religious duty and compassion, with her hesitation, where present, quickly resolved within the same exchange rather than sustained across the narrative. This narrative compression, in which conflict is introduced and resolved within a single dialogic exchange, textually signals that domestic authority is not genuinely contested but merely gestured toward before being restored to the male protagonist.

This portrayal is closely tied to the conventional interpretation of male leadership found in Surah An-Nisa, verse 34, which refers to men as *qawwamun*, or leaders of women. M. Quraish Shihab and Nasaruddin Umar, despite coming from different scholarly backgrounds, similarly argue that this verse was not intended to legitimize absolute male dominance, but rather to emphasize a contextual and interchangeable function of responsibility depending on social conditions. Their interpretations of gender equality regarding the themes of creation and women's leadership converge on the position that no verse in the Qur'an is gender-biased, and that Islam in fact greatly honors women. Nasaruddin Umar further argues that the terms *ar-rijal* and *an-nisa* in this verse should be understood as references to gender functions and relations rather than strictly biological categories, meaning that leadership roles within the household should ideally be fluid and negotiable between husband and wife.

Read against this contextual scholarship, the brevity and narrative compression surrounding Aisha's dialogic resistance in the novel can be interpreted as a textual strategy that forecloses the fluid, negotiable leadership these scholars describe, in favor of a single-line reassertion of male decision-making authority. The obedience of the female characters is thus not simply a character trait summarized by the plot, but a textual pattern reinforced through the relative absence of sustained argumentative dialogue attributed to them.

3.4 Self-Sacrifice

The third dimension is self-sacrifice, textually constructed through the narrator's treatment of Aisha's and Maria's respective speech at moments of crisis. Aisha's consent to Fahri's second marriage is narrated in language that foregrounds religious framing over personal grief, her permission phrased as an act of worship rather than a negotiated concession, while Maria's acceptance of her position as second wife is rendered through weakened, fragmented speech consistent with her declining health, textually merging her physical frailty with her narrative passivity. The pairing of illness with acquiescence in Maria's characterization is a notable textual choice, since it

removes agency from her acceptance by attributing it partly to physical incapacity rather than to reasoned consent.

This depiction of sacrifice is often associated with hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim concerning the virtue of a wife who remains obedient and patient in supporting her husband, which within popular religious discourse is frequently interpreted as a guarantee of a woman's honor in the hereafter. Nasaruddin Umar cautions that a singular reading of such hadith risks overlooking the principle of reciprocal justice that is equally demanded of the husband, meaning that the virtues of patience and obedience should not be imposed solely upon women. The self-sacrifice of the female characters in this novel can also be read through the lens of *maqashid al-shariah*, which places the preservation of lineage and family harmony among the core objectives of Islamic law. Nevertheless, the textual pairing of Maria's consent with physical weakness, alongside the absence of any comparable narrative moment in which Fahri's own resolve is tested through equivalent hardship, indicates an asymmetry at the level of narrative construction itself, not merely at the level of plot outcome.

Taken together, these three dimensions demonstrate that the idealized image of women in *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* is constructed through a combination of normative religious values and patriarchal social expectations at both the narrative and dialogic level, one that has not yet fully aligned with the contextual interpretations offered by contemporary scholars regarding gender equality in Islam.

3.5 The Gap between the Idealized Image and Social Reality of Gender

Addressing the second research question concerning the gap between idealized representation and the social reality of gender, textual analysis reveals a fairly clear tension between this idealized image and the language used to narrate the female characters' lived experience. The practice of polygamy undertaken by the male protagonist places the female characters in a subordinate position at the level of narrative voice itself: decisions are consistently narrated from Fahri's point of view or reported through his internal reasoning, while the female characters' perspectives are relayed secondhand or compressed into brief reported speech (Wardani & Jamaluddin, 2019; Kodriyaningrum, 2020).

This narrative asymmetry is consistent with critical discourse analysis of the film adaptation, which similarly found that Aisha's self-effacing statements, such as her declaration that she is happy so long as her husband is happy, function linguistically to mask underlying subordination behind a vocabulary of harmony (Wardani & Jamaluddin, 2019). A parallel pattern in the construction of Islamic identity through the veiled woman figure in the same cinematic universe shows analogous entanglement between authoritative male framing and religiously coded feminine speech (Sari, 2018).

This kind of tension has, in fact, long been a subject of debate among Muslim scholars themselves. Siti Musdah Mulia, in her work *Islam Menggugat Poligami*, takes a firm stance against the practice of polygamy, arguing that it runs contrary to the principles of gender justice and women's rights, since in practice it more often sacrifices the wife than fulfills the justice it normatively promises. Read against the novel's own narration, in which polygamy is textually resolved within a few pages of dialogue with no lingering exploration of Aisha's or Maria's psychological cost, this scholarly critique gains further textual support: the brevity of the narrative's emotional reckoning stands in tension with the weight Mulia assigns to the wife's sacrifice in practice.

M. Quraish Shihab, while not rejecting polygamy outright, nonetheless emphasizes that the condition of justice required in polygamy is exceedingly difficult to fulfill, particularly in its emotional and psychological dimensions, in accordance with the affirmation in Surah An-Nisa, verse 129, that human beings can never achieve complete fairness toward their wives, especially with regard to feelings.

This verse serves as an important reference point for reading the gap present in the novel, since its narration of harmonious polygamy, compressed and resolved within single scenes, conveys the impression that emotional fairness is easily attained, whereas the Qur'an itself textually acknowledges the human limitation in achieving it. Both M. Quraish Shihab and Musdah Mulia hold critical views of polygamy within the context of gender justice, agreeing that achieving such justice is extremely difficult, particularly in its emotional and psychological aspects (Vianita et al., 2025). This critical consensus reinforces the argument that the novel's narrative compression around polygamy constitutes a textual oversimplification of a matter that is far more complex within Islamic discourse itself.

The gender gap in the novel is also evident in the pattern of power relations within the household at the level of who is granted extended direct speech: major decisions such as the second marriage, the resolution of conflict between wives, and the future direction of the family are narrated predominantly through Fahri's dialogue and internal reasoning, while the female characters' voices appear mainly in brief, reactive lines. This condition aligns with Musdah Mulia's critique of conventional Islamic family law, which in her view positions women as objects of law rather than as equal subjects in household decision-making, so that gender injustice is often concealed behind family norms that appear ordinary.

The difference identified in this study lies in the aspect of the female characters' textual agency. Unlike prior research, which tends to position female characters entirely as passive objects, close reading of the original novel text shows that Aisha's dialogue, though brief, contains moments of direct address in which she names her own discomfort before ultimately deferring to Fahri's decision, for instance voicing initial reluctance before reframing her consent in religious terms. This textual detail indicates a certain space for negotiation, demonstrated through the sequencing of her speech rather than its content alone, even though that negotiation is ultimately resolved through full acceptance of the male character's decision.

This narrative sequencing, in which resistance is voiced before being narratively withdrawn, can be read as a form of limited textual agency, borrowing a term frequently used in contemporary Islamic studies concerning the awareness of subordination and the articulation of agency among Muslim women. This inner process, traceable through the pacing and phrasing of Aisha's dialogue rather than through summary of her character alone, indicates that the novelist does not entirely erase the female voice, even though the resolution of conflict is ultimately directed toward full acceptance of male authority rather than equal negotiation between both parties.

3.6 Implications of the Gap for Critical Reading

The gap between the idealized image and the social reality of gender in this novel, traceable at the level of dialogue structure, narrative voice, and descriptive emphasis rather than plot alone, ultimately affirms that the representation of women in popular Islamic literature cannot be read singularly as a discourse that is either entirely liberating or entirely oppressive. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* does present female characters with textually

marked moments of inner depth and self-awareness, yet the structure of narrative voice surrounding them continues to sustain a pattern of male dominance, as Musdah Mulia critiques with respect to conventional Islamic family law.

This tension carries direct relevance for literary education in contemporary Indonesian classrooms. Under the Kurikulum Merdeka, gender equality has been formally positioned as a cross-cutting value that Indonesian-language and literature instruction is expected to reflect, yet recent analysis of officially distributed high school textbooks shows that this value remains unevenly and often superficially represented in the reading materials students actually encounter (Annisa et al., 2025). Given this gap between curricular intent and textbook content, a novel such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, precisely because of its immense popularity among Indonesian students and its simultaneous entanglement of religious idealism with patriarchal narrative structure, offers teachers and literary critics a productive classroom text for guided critical reading rather than one to be assigned uncritically. Educators could use close analysis of Aisha's compressed dialogic resistance, for instance, as a concrete entry point for teaching students to distinguish between a text's surface moral message and the gendered power structures embedded in its narrative form, an exercise that models the kind of gender-literate reading competence the curriculum aspires to but that current teaching materials do not yet consistently supply.

A critical reading attentive to these textual patterns, rather than to plot summary alone, is therefore important not only for scholarly analysis but for encouraging readers, particularly today's generation of Muslim women readers and students, to distinguish between liberating Islamic values and patriarchal narrative constructions that are often wrapped in religious legitimacy.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the novel *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy constructs an idealized image of women through three main dimensions, namely personal piety, domestic role, and self-sacrifice, which symbolically reflect the qualities of inspirational female figures in Islamic history such as Khadijah, Aisha, and Fatimah az-Zahra. Nonetheless, this idealized image harbors a fairly clear gap with the social reality of gender experienced by the female characters in the novel, particularly with regard to the practice of polygamy and the structure of power relations within the household, which remains dominated by the male character.

Examination of the views held by Muslim scholars such as Nasaruddin Umar, M. Quraish Shihab, and Siti Musdah Mulia shows that the construction of idealized women in this novel has not yet fully aligned with the contextual interpretations offered regarding gender equality in Islam. The novel instead simplifies the issues of polygamy and household power relations into a harmonious narrative, whereas within Islamic discourse itself both issues remain the subject of complex critical debate.

This study also finds that the female characters in the novel, particularly Aisha, possess a limited space for agency demonstrated through a process of inner negotiation, meaning that the idealized image of women in the novel is not entirely passive but is instead constructed through a complex struggle between religious idealism and gender consciousness. Such nuances of internal negotiation are most fully accessible through the novel's narrative form, which affords sustained access to interiority, unspoken conflict, and shifting consciousness dimensions of female agency that are often compressed, externalized, or lost altogether in the novel's film adaptation. It is precisely

this focus on the novel as a distinct object of analysis, rather than its cinematic counterpart, that allows this study to uncover the subtler and more ambivalent forms of women's agency that visual media tend to flatten into more straightforward depictions of submission or resistance. These findings therefore contribute a distinctive perspective to the development of feminist literary criticism on popular Islamic literary works in Indonesia, while also encouraging a more critical reading of women's representation in similar works.

Future research is recommended to examine the reception of today's generation of Muslim women readers toward the representation of women in this novel, in order to determine the extent to which this construction is accepted, negotiated, or critically challenged within an evolving social context.

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